

“Accepting Grace”
II Kings 5:1-14
July 7, 2019

Back when I was first starting out in ministry almost 40 years ago, I would sometimes refer to my sermons as “Saturday Night Specials” because I would agonize all week long about what to say, and then before I knew it, the hour of 10 p.m. on Saturday had struck, and I still had nothing coherent down on paper to share with my congregation, who would be gathering barely twelve hours later to hear what they were paying me \$25 a week to share with them. Of course, I was in a panic. I had already settled on a text, but then it was time to rush to my reference books - it was too late to get to the library - to see what the experts in biblical interpretation had to say about the week’s scripture lesson. And sometimes, in desperation, I would say pretty much what the experts said. But, more often than not, after reading pious words and deep thoughts, I would decide on a message quite different from what any of the so-called experts had to say.

Sometimes that can work, and in our scripture lesson this morning, this was the tack initially taken by Naaman, a Syrian army commander who was in a desperate situation. Here was a successful leader who could not rely on others to do his thinking for him on the battlefield, who had to show results to the peril not only of his own life, but also for the survival of his country. His job was to be on the front lines, facing the enemy, battling for his very existence. By all accounts, he had done his job well, and had been rewarded with position, rank, and glory.

But now the enemy was no longer facing him menacingly across the battle lines. Harm’s way was not in front of Naaman, somewhere “out there,” but was now found within his very being. He had a virtually incurable disease, and Naaman was desperate. In fact, things were so hopeless that he decided to pay heed to the words of a little servant girl, captured in battle, from sworn foes of Naaman’s own king and country. Humbled by disease, Naaman - at first - humbled himself. We might find that commendable, if not surprising. After all, Naaman had much to regain, and little left to lose.

Yet his subsequent behavior was odd, wasn't it: having sought and gained advice offered in good faith, he apparently changed his mind and turned his back, denying truth where he had actively sought it out. Why? Because somehow the cure didn't fit his idea of what was necessary to be healed.

And so we seek out directions, being hopelessly lost, but then figure that the information shared selflessly with us cannot possibly be right, and we just go off on our own tangent. Surely there must be some unknown short-cut, an easier way!

After all, a lot of us firmly believe, with some justification I might add, that when it comes to certain things, if you're going to have it done right, you have to do it yourself. Could the family doctor know our bodies better than we know ourselves? Of course not! And so we don't finish our course of medications to the tenth day of the antibiotic, or we fail to follow through on an exercise regimen designed to supplement our dietary adjustments. Oh, we might concede that the plumber has a leg up on those of us who don't really know which way to turn a screw-driver, but when it comes to the medical arts - or the spiritual arts - Naaman (and people just like Naaman) was not ready to concede that his beliefs might not measure up to what was needed when faced with a crisis.

And so Naaman, thinking that his god was as good as Elisha's, and that his country was mightier than Israel, that his homeland was just as good as the servant girl's, decided that listening to the professionals and doing something different was not only unnecessary, but would be counter-productive. It certainly sounded, for him, to be counter-intuitive. Surely it was rank superstition, Naaman may have told himself, to believe that the waters of the River Jordan were better than the waters of any other river.

As we know from our scripture lesson, Naaman came to his senses before it was too late. Maybe that was because Naaman recognized the true nature of leadership, and of authority. Leadership is only proven to be leadership when someone decides to

follow. An official is nothing - unless her office is recognized. A commander is powerless should his troops mutiny ... and gods die when they are ignored.

Likewise, help is only help when it is accepted. Otherwise it is forced and becomes coercion, or it is refused and becomes merely a good intention that couldn't be followed through on. In the end, Elisha could only point out the way for Naaman to be healed. It took a true leader, like Naaman, to recognize when it was time to follow, seeing in the prophetic office exercised by Elisha that it was not just the God of his enemy Israel who was at work, but it was the Lord of the universe who offered salvation.

The hindrance to faith, the stumbling block to belief, the obstacles along the path to growth, the obstructions encountered on the way to salvation - none of these lie so much in powers beyond ourselves, but result from our inner failure to take the first step of faith, a step which can only be taken when we have come to the realization within ourselves of what *has* been done, what *is* being done, what *can* be done for our benefit. But we have to accept grace when it is offered, we have to take what is given, and make the cure of our souls a reality for ourselves.

Elisha could have prescribed remedies till he was blue in the face, but in the end it was Naaman himself who had to go to the River Jordan and bathe.

Fifty years ago in the throes of the conflict in Vietnam, my generation was asking the question, "What if they gave a War and nobody came?" Allow me to rephrase that question by asking, "What if they crucified a Savior, but nobody accepted him?" The entire drama of creation, redemption, and ultimate salvation is without meaning for any one of us, whether we call ourselves Christians or not, if somehow we don't derive meaning from the acts of God that take place in the here and now, thus making our own salvation possible. We can be loved with love divine, all loves excelling - but if we do not return that love in thought, word, deed, and in love itself, we might as well have been ignored by God in the first place, struggling in our own ways in our own little world,

unaware that beyond ourselves is a power that speaks with authority, yet allows us to choose our own path, if that is what we truly want.

If we scripturally claim that the body of Christ is the church, then we have to incarnate Christ's ministry, Christ's love, for all. Otherwise the church is no longer the body of Christ, but simply yet another civic organization that does nice things from time to time. Clearly, it's nice to be nice. But that's not what we're here for. When Jesus was faced with disciples who simply were not up to the task, he recommended a strict diet - of prayer, and fasting. May we in our own personal life, and in our corporate life as the church, become increasingly like Christ, living lives of grace, so that others might accept the graciousness that God brings to a world which so badly needs it.

Let us pray: